

**Who's Boo?**  
**The Role and Significance of the Myth and Alter-ego of the  
Performance Artist: Real, Unreal or Hyperreal?**

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## Who?

as far as he can remember or SEEMS to remember boo simulacrum woke up under a gooseberry bush in the country on the 1<sup>st</sup> of may but he forgets what year and had and still has no memory of what or who he was before or WHETHER he was before or whether he did anything before he woke up which he cannot now remember much of or bits of but not clearly but he did SEEM to remember things

he SEEMS to remember that at that time he had no clothes on and it was COLD and there was dew on the grass and the first thing he did he seems to remember was to wash his face in the dew which was also cold and this was a good thing because he has found out since then that washing in dew on the 1<sup>st</sup> of may keeps you young

boo was COLD with no clothes on and because he woke up as a fully grown man with a beard he was ashamed as well so he needed to find some clothes so he searched and walked around the woods and fields until he found a field that had been planted with seeds and to keep boos friends the crows from eating the seeds the farmer had put a scarecrow there so boo took his clothes and wore them and threw the dead body of the poor old scarecrow under a hedge

at night it was COLD so boo needed to find somewhere to live and he found an old shed that no one wanted so he lived there and there were some old tools and things in there so boo started to make the things he needed

on the edge of the village there was a schoolhouse and because the days were getting warmer the teacher was leaving the window open so boo hid under the window and listened to the teacher teaching the children how to read and this is how boo learned to READ

boo found an old book in his coat pocket and the book was about some children whose father was a man who would stick up for people in a big building called a court and defend them and he was defending a black man and there is a man in the book who is a bit like boo so that is how boo became called boo

During a difficult period in my life, following anxiety and bereavement, an unconscious need for separation of the self arose, a desire for self preservation, indeed a kind of 'rebirth' of self. This new self manifested in the person of Boo Simulacrum, maybe an internal and subjective form of healing?

Boo is very much an *a priori* character. *A priori* knowledge or justification is not based upon experience; in other words, empirical proof is unnecessary. The term *a priori* can alternatively refer to an argument made without a logical basis, (as in the case of the existence of Boo Simulacrum) that is, without evidence or analysis.

The purpose of Boo Simulacrum's status is to indicate that he is a construct that represents a new phenomenon, a break with the past and all its *a posteriori* constrictions, a fresh page, as it were. An *a posteriori* justification relies on the presence of experience, or prior knowledge.

The inspiration for how Boo learned to read, and his chosen abode, was drawn from the 1818 novel 'Frankenstein, or, A Modern Prometheus', by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, in which Frankenstein's Monster learns to read by eaves-dropping on the occupants of a remote cottage:

*"I escaped to the open country and fearfully took refuge in a low hovel, quite bare, and making a wretched appearance after the palaces I had beheld in the village. This hovel however, joined a cottage of a neat and pleasant appearance..."<sup>1</sup>*

He is able to see and hear the character Safie being taught to read, write and speak French by Agatha and Felix, the brother and sister with whom she is staying:

*"On examining my dwelling, I found that one of the windows of the cottage had formerly occupied a part of it, but the panes had been filled up with wood. In one of these was a small and almost imperceptible chink through which the eye could just penetrate."<sup>2</sup>*

Like the Monster, Boo finds a book in the pocket of his stolen coat that teaches him something of his origins, and aids him in his task of learning to read and write. When creating the myth or biography of an *a priori* character, it can be troublesome accounting for abilities that the character could not possess, but are necessary for the sake of clarity in the narrative.

*"Soon after my arrival in the hovel I discovered some papers in the pocket of the dress which I had taken from your laboratory. At first*

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<sup>1</sup> Shelley M. *Frankenstein*. London: The Folio Society; 2004. p. 98

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 100

*I had neglected them, but now that I was able to decipher the characters in which they were written, I began to study them with diligence. It was your journal...'*<sup>3</sup>

Again similar to the Monster (another *a priori* character) Boo is an Outsider, an outcast, in fact, a liminal character: one which can be defined as having intermediate status between one identity and another, ambiguous and defying classification. Many legendary characters or beasts are considered liminal. Again mirroring the Monster's experience, he never enters the village, venturing only as far as its boundary and hiding from its inhabitants.

Boo's first name was taken from the 1960 novel 'To Kill a Mockingbird' by Harper Lee. This was one of my favourite books as a child, and I was always drawn to the Arthur 'Boo' Radley character, played in the 1962 film by the actor Robert Duval. This character was an Outsider, disenfranchised and obviously mentally ill, never leaving his house during the day, and feared by the children in the story. Here Jem Finch describes Boo Radley:

*"Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that's why his hands were blood-stained... There was a long jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time."*<sup>4</sup>

But the dénouement of the story involves Boo Radley saving the character Scout Finch from possible murder by Bob Ewell, showing us that Boo is not the monster he was perceived to be by the children in the story. I associated my alter ego with this character because Boo Simulacrum, like Boo Radley, is a person who hides, who is at the boundary of society, not fully taking part in it. They are socially awkward characters, both silent, both beneficent, but not visibly so, and are similarly distrusted by the community on the boundary of which they live, as are many who suffer from mental illness. This is autobiographical: I have often felt distrust and lack of acceptance, viewing myself as an Outsider, as an artist and, more generally, as a citizen.

Outsider art is usually made by individuals who are not formally trained, and are, in some way, outside of the mainstream of society. The reasons for their Outsider status vary: they may be mentally ill. Many mental institutions run programmes of art therapy for residents where they discover an aptitude and love for art. Outsiders may be isolated for other reasons, for instance, those

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 122

<sup>4</sup> Lee H. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Harmondsworth: Penguin; 1973. p. 19

that are in prison or living in very remote locations. Often very harsh self-critics, their work is sometimes valued by collectors and curators for its uniqueness, purity and originality (notable examples of such curators include Harald Szeeman, who maintained an Outsider presence in the Documenta exhibitions, and Roger Cardinal, Victor Musgrave and Monika Kinley, who co-curated 'The Outsider Collection' started in 1981 after a ground-breaking exhibition at London's Hayward Gallery in 1979. Upon Musgrave's death in 1984, Kinley continued to add to the collection which now comprises over 800 works.)<sup>5</sup>

A theme allied to that of the Outsider artist is that of the Outsider generally in society, as examined in literature by authors and Philosophers of the school of Existentialism. Put simply, this school is concerned with the finding of the self and the ascribing of meaning to life through choice, personal responsibility and free will. Existentialists assert that one should be encouraged to make responsible life choices rather than being forced by ethics, rules, or traditions to behave in a prescribed manner. They view society as unnatural, and that its traditional religious beliefs or commandments and secular laws or rules are arrived at arbitrarily, and should not be regarded as binding.

One notable exponent of Existentialism was the French philosopher and author, Albert Camus (more accurately, Camus was an *Absurdist*-Existentialist. Absurdists believe that there is an irreconcilable conflict between the human preoccupation with seeking inherent meaning in existence: that any such search is bound to fail. The Absurd arises out of the contradictory nature of the simultaneous existence of the human mind and the universe, or external reality). Camus wrote 'L'Étranger' or *The Stranger*, normally titled 'The Outsider' in English. In this novel, the protagonist Meursault refuses, in a quite unconscious way, to adhere to social conventions and mores. Through Meursault, Camus presents the world as meaningless, or rather, its meaning is rendered by oneself; the onus is on the individual as to how he or she ascribes significance to a situation.

If Boo were to adhere to any school of philosophy, then it would be to that of Existentialism. Boo can also be defined in terms of Solipsism, a very much older school, but one that can be viewed as allied to Existentialism, or a sort of *proto*-existentialism.

*"... what the solipsist means is quite correct; only it cannot be said, but makes itself manifest. The world is my world: this is manifest in*

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<sup>5</sup> 'Outsider Art' exhibition. Tate Britain, September 2005 – January 2006.  
<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/outsiderart/default.shtm>

*the fact that the limits of language (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of my world ... This is connected with the fact that no part of our experience is at the same time a priori... Whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is. There is no a priori order of things... Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism... What brings the self into philosophy is the fact that 'the world is my world'. The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul, with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world-- not a part of it.'*<sup>6</sup>

Wittgenstein also formulated the idea of the 'private language',<sup>7</sup> that is, the notion that an individual can experience thoughts and emotions that are incommunicable to others. This could be realised through solipsism: the creation of one's own myth that is beyond the comprehension of others, despite the fact that they speak the same language, something that is purely for oneself. However, Wittgenstein later disputed his own theory, claiming that one could always make one's feelings understood.

As an *a priori* 'simulacrum'<sup>8</sup>, Boo cannot necessarily be easily understood: there is no temporal basis for his thoughts, they are purely subjective and based on self-specific, internal or personal constructs, indeed they manifest themselves in a private language. If we are, therefore, to concur with Wittgenstein, philosophy, and by extension language, is not part of the physical (or, nominally real) world but no less *true*, for all that.

## **The Artist's Myth**

*"The myth of art current today is characterised by the mission of art and the emphasis is placed on societal issues. The artist is a special mediator here... not so much a creator/god anymore but rather as a priest/shaman... When the artist creates a myth around him or herself, his or her life and works, then, when all is said and done, it*

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<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein L. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. 1922.

<http://filepedia.org/files/Ludwig%20Wittgenstein%20-%20Tractatus%20Logico-Philosophicus.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Kemerling G. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Analysis of Language*. 1998-2002.

<http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/6s.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard J. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e), Inc.; 1983.

*is an expression of the belief in the legitimacy of his or her activities.*"<sup>9</sup>

What follows is part of the joint artist's statement of Jane Porter, a friend of mine, and her brother Guyan Porter. It employs the use of myth:

*"Guyan and Jane Porter were brought up by wolves in a remote part of the North-east of Scotland. As adolescents they were slowly introduced to society, teaching each other to read and write and eventually going to school in Aberdeen."*<sup>10</sup>

I asked Jane to clarify this statement, and in particular why she and her brother felt the need to include what is obviously mythical content relating to wolves. She states that:

*"We weren't literally brought up by wolves but we did have a complicated childhood so I suppose it's kind of metaphorical. I'm quite secretive about my past life which is reflected in my work. I like to conceal myself within words and images offering glimpses to be interpreted by the audience. I have had quite a few questions about the wolves, one woman on an art site said that she couldn't put it on there as she felt it was unfair on the people visiting the site if it wasn't true. Warhol, Bacon and lots of people created a brand and alter egos for themselves. It's part of being an artist... I often find artist's statements and biographies really dry and it got people talking."*<sup>11</sup>

Many artists seek this metaphorical technique to perpetuate the survival of a myth through its continuation as narrative. This continuation can also be observed in other forms such as film, novels or other stories produced by mass popular or other culture. This is also achieved through the development of a cognitive element, in other words, as part of a myth adopted to explain or make sense of the artist and his or her place within the world. An oft-repeated theme of myths associated with their cognitive elements is that of the myth as distortion, deception, or falsehood.

The origin of the *mythos* viewed as distinct and separate from the *logos* lies in the Middle Ages when the word myth became associated, through Christian edict, with pagan false-hood. In other

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<sup>9</sup> Sarapik V. *Artist and Myth*. 2001

<http://www.folklore.ee/Folklore/vol15/myth.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Website of the artist Jane E. Porter.

[http://www.janeeporster.co.uk/about/about\\_the\\_artist/biography](http://www.janeeporster.co.uk/about/about_the_artist/biography)

<sup>11</sup> [personal communication by email] 2010 06 (12)

words, a belief in anything not acknowledged by the church was a belief in myth. However, there are many examples of parables in the Bible. Their purpose is to present a moral or lesson in a simplified narrative form, in order that the moral can be more easily apprehended. The artist's myth is employed for precisely the same purpose: it is a narrative designed to obviate the necessity of much long-winded information, however true; a more coherent version of events, premises, theories and so forth, for the sake of clarity.

*"The mythic quality of art inevitably penetrates into the very metalanguage<sup>12</sup> it uses - into art history and criticism. Art history differs from general history in that most usually it is about individual persons. A history that tries to achieve some semblance of objectivity and attempts to free itself from the narrative avoids the individual... Art history can never do that and as a result it is prone to fiction and myth. One of the bases for the mythic elements in the artist's biography is the selective quality of memory itself. Art history inevitably relies to a great extent on memory but the structure of memory often tends to be in the key of myth."<sup>13</sup>*

### **Joseph Beuys' Myth and Persona**

During World War Two, Beuys was stationed in the Crimea as a member of combat bomber units. From 1943 onward he served as a rear-gunner in a Stuka dive-bomber. In 1944 Beuys' plane was shot down on the Crimean Front, close to Znamianka, where he sustained serious injuries when the plane crashed. His account of the event later in 1979 became the basis of his controversial myth and artist's persona. He claimed he had been rescued by nomadic Tatars, who, he said, wrapped him in animal fat and felt, and took him to their settlement where they nursed him back to health.

*"I was still unconscious then and only came round completely after twelve days or so, and by then I was back in a German field hospital. So the memories I have of that time are images that penetrated my consciousness... I remember... the felt of their tents, and the dense pungent smell of cheese, fat and milk. They covered my body in fat to help it regenerate warmth, and wrapped it in felt as an insulator to keep warmth in."<sup>14</sup>*

Although eyewitnesses stated that the pilot died from his wounds shortly after the crash, they also averred that Beuys was fully conscious, and was recovered by a search party of German soldiers. Crimean Tatars were not in residence at their village at the time.

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<sup>12</sup> Metalanguage: language or symbols employed when language itself is being discussed or examined.

<sup>13</sup> Sarapik. Op. cit. <http://www.folklore.ee/Folklore/vol15/myth.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Tisdall C. *Joseph Beuys*. New York: Guggenheim; 1979. p.16 - 17

Beuys was taken straight to a German military hospital where he was treated for a number of weeks. Caroline Tisdall, Beuys' partner in myth making, asserts that:

*"It was a mythologised event... but based on real experiences. The crash was real, the Tatars were real, being wrapped in fat and felt were real."*<sup>15</sup>

It would not be the first time, or the last, that Beuys would re-interpret his own biography for the sake of the greater realism of meaning within his artistic practice. Not only does this story serve as a powerful myth of origins for Joseph Beuys' artistic persona, it also helps us to interpret his use of certain materials in his work, including felt and fat which were central elements in his sculpture and performance.

Beuys created an instantly recognisable persona for himself. He *lived* in his self-appointed character or role of the artist/shaman and teacher (teacher was also one of the various roles of the shaman). He was always to be seen in his distinctive felt fedora hat, beige coloured fishing vest, white shirt, jeans and boots, he wore a wolf-skin coat when the weather was cold. These garments were the *costume* of his persona as artist.

My interpretation of why he never varied his dress is that he was indicating that while wearing this costume, he was 'on-duty', *living* his role of artist and shaman, so that all he did while in his artist's uniform should be considered art.

*"... his greatest work of art was himself. The fictional character of Joseph Beuys began performing in his forties and lasted until his death. Beuys, with his felt hat, fishing jacket and personal mythology is the closest Germany has ever got to producing a rock star."*<sup>16</sup>

The fact that there are no images of him in his 'civvies' implies that he had no life beyond that of artist, that his self-appointed task: to save the world, both human and natural, through art, was too important for him to ever relax.

In December 1970, Hans van der Grinton interviewed Beuys. He is quoted as saying that the mythical stream:

*"... should live as part of the self-aware, free human being...the mythical must be transformed and integrated into the*

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<sup>15</sup> Caroline Tisdall Interview, Monday 19 July 1999.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/1999/jul/19/artsfeatures2>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

*contemporary, self-aware thinking of the free individual, into all that today is done, made and created...*<sup>17</sup>

He also questioned whether:

*"...truth can only be grasped and not created?"*<sup>18</sup>

### **Marcel Duchamp's Alter Ego, Rose Selavy**

In 1921, Marcel Duchamp was setting about developing, in fact revolutionising, what could be defined as an artwork. He dressed one day in a large, black-feathered woman's hat, a pearl necklace, a blouse, a black wig and a velvet cape. He also applied make up. Suddenly he had created the first performance persona, in one stroke he had invented performance art. He was unwilling to explain in detail why he found the need to turn cross-dresser and adopt the alter ego of Rose Selavy. In 1966, when he was 79, he told critic Pierre Cabanne:

*"... I wanted to change my identity, and the first idea that came to me was to take a Jewish name. I was Catholic, and it would be a change to go from one religion to another. But I didn't find a Jewish name that I especially liked, or that tempted me. Suddenly, I had an idea: why not change sex? It was much simpler"*<sup>19</sup>

However, Bruce Naumann didn't believe:

*"...that the alter ego was intended purely as a joke – rather, it was a serious attempt, on Duchamp's part, to expand the possibilities of what constituted a work of art, as he had so ingeniously done a few years earlier with his introduction of the readymade."*<sup>20</sup>

Duchamp was not only challenging perceived notions of art, but of *beauty*, also. He changed from being a painter to being a sculptor, so it is possible that Rose Selavy underlines and stridently announces this moment of life change and change of artistic practice. It was at precisely this moment that the performance persona had its genesis.

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<sup>17</sup> Harlan V. *What Is Art?: Conversation with Joseph Beuys*. Forest Row: Clairview Books; 2007. p. 76

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 77

<sup>19</sup> Pitman J. *Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray: Dada in drag*. The Times. 09/02/2008 [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/visual\\_arts/article3304163.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/visual_arts/article3304163.ece)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

## What?

boo was happy for a while living alone in his little house in the woods but after a while he became lonely so he made himself some friends including hamstringing the cat and mr sausages and albert the dog and the green monkey and punch but he wishes he had not made punch because punch was always having naughty ideas for things for boo to do like setting light to things so boo had to take punch apart and make him into a more well behaved doll

boo started to become suspicious that he had been MADE in the same way that he had MADE the dolls

at the edge of the village people sometimes used to throw things away and boo would go and take the things if he thought they would be useful or if he thought he could make other things out of them and this is how he got some of the materials and clothes for his friends the dolls and also more clothes and sometimes he found books

one day he found a book that was mostly pictures and in the book was an old man in a hat and this man would make things like boo does only boo could see that the things HE made were full of MEANINGS although they were not beautiful or skillful in the way that the things boo made were but boo did not think this mattered and boo did not want to make dolls and chairs and things anymore he now wanted to be like the old man in the hat and become AN ARTIST

but boo only had this one picture book without much writing in it and he thought and thought about how he could become AN ARTIST without instructions and the teacher in the schoolhouse at the edge of the village just taught the children to paint and although boo would go and hide under the window during the art lesson he could never learn anything useful

boo often found brown paper at the edge of the village and string as well from when people had been sent a package or a present and boo would always keep these and one day he had an idea that he could make a book about his experiments in ART with drawings and writing about what he had made and was thinking about making and become a REAL ARTIST

Boo's desire to become a "real artist" reflects my own desire at the time that I created him, and he is, in fact, one of the elements I put in train to enable me to make this transition from applied artist or craftsman to fine artist. It also implies his sub-conscious ambition to be 'real' in general.

*"Health Helper (1979), incorporates the sign of the Red Cross and the Holy Cross with the artist's name, signaling his dual status as artist and shamanistic transformer."*<sup>21</sup>

Beuys considered himself a healer (one of the principal roles of the shaman): he spoke of an open wound in society, one in need of stanching. Not only was he referring to issues apparent in the state of Western, developed countries, but also to their disjunction and lack of co-operation with the more spiritually aware and traditional cultures still extant in the East and Far East. He argued that for us to survive it was necessary to transform this society, which he viewed as an organism. He stated that a closer link between our spiritual and corporeal lives was essential to cultural and social regeneration.

*"His art offered both poetic representations of the injury and practical prescriptions for a cure...and alludes to healing techniques of all kinds, both physical and spiritual...the Christian notion of suffering, redemption, and rebirth (motifs of the cross, baptism), and the ecstatic, mystical activities of the shaman, who serves as a channel for the flow of energy between the earthly and spiritual realms."*<sup>22</sup>

The figure of the 'wounded man' or 'wounded shaman' was a recurrent theme in the cave art of the Upper-Palaeolithic period of human history and later. Beuys' obvious awareness of this particular element of the cult and history of shamanism and the art associated with it can be demonstrated by the title and nature of his piece: 'Show Your Wound', 1977. These wounded figures were often depicted recumbent, pierced by many spears or arrows, or with blood flowing from the nose. Lewis-Williams<sup>23</sup> makes the case that these paintings represent shamans in the throes of 'shamanic ecstasy', brought on by the ingestion of hallucinogenic herbal substances, dancing or other trance-inducing activities. The shaman was often shown as a liminal character, that is, one in a state of

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<sup>21</sup>Levine A. *Joseph Beuys Medicine and Healing*: University of Minnesota.  
<http://www.walkerart.org/archive/8/9D43C1DEC623D3426167.htm>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis-Williams D. *The Mind in the Cave*. London: Thames & Hudson; 2008. p. 270 - 271

transformation midway between human and animal (in other words, an anthropomorphic animal).

*"The dualities of art as tool and wound are evoked in the doubled photographs of the multiple a simultaneous allusion to Christ's display of his stigmata and the image of a hospital radiograph used in World War II, which is incorporated into the work."*<sup>24</sup>

### **The Dual, the Double and the Hyperreal**

*"...following an inverse law, an artist is only an artist on condition that he is a double man and that there is not one single phenomenon of his double nature of which he is ignorant."*<sup>25</sup>

*"...man is not truly one, but truly two."*<sup>26</sup>

In his essay 'The Uncanny', Freud linked the manifestation of, or obsession with *The Double* to the abnormal psychology of a subject who suffers from complexes or anxieties:

*"This relation is accentuated by mental processes leaping from one of these characters to another — by what we should call telepathy —, so that the one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other. Or it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self."*<sup>27</sup>

Carl Jung developed the ideas of Freud. He considered the divided psyche or self as normal, even though it is frequently manifested in the form of pathologies such as neurosis and psychosis.

*"... it is one of the curses of modern man that many people suffer from this divided personality. It is by no means a pathological symptom; it is a normal fact that can be observed at any time and anywhere. It is not merely the neurotic whose right hand does not*

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<sup>24</sup> Op. cit.

<http://www.walkerart.org/archive/8/9D43C1DEC623D3426167.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Baudelaire C. *On the Essence of Laughter*. 1855.

<http://phoenixandturtle.net/excerptmill/ baudelaire.html>

<sup>26</sup> Stevenson R L. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited; 1994. p. 48 - 49

<sup>27</sup> Freud S. *The Uncanny*, *Penguin Freud Library*, vol.14. London: Penguin; 1990. p. 335 - 376

*know what the left is doing. This predicament is a symptom of a general unconsciousness that is the undeniable common inheritance of all mankind.*"<sup>28</sup>

So Jung believes that this split state, so harmful and pathology inducing if ignored or denied, is in fact very common, if not the norm, and all that needs to be achieved for a healthy psychology is an acceptance of and union of these sundered elements of the self.

*"A man likes to believe he is the master of his soul. But as long as he is unable to control his moods and emotions, or to be conscious of the myriad secret ways in which unconscious factors insinuate themselves into his arrangements and decisions, he is certainly not his own master... Modern man protects himself from seeing his own split state by a system of compartments. Certain areas of outer life and his own behaviour are kept, as it were, in separate drawers and are never confronted with one another."*<sup>29</sup>

### **Douglas Gordon and Caledonian Antisyzygy**

Douglas Gordon's photographs, films, video installations and textual pieces commonly deal with the complicated issues involved in duality, split personalities, doppelgangers, identity and mistaken identity; and opposites including good and evil, the self and the other. His work seeks to show how these opposed and contradictory states are simultaneous and inseparable.

In the installation 'through a looking glass', 1999, Gordon uses the most well-known sequence from the film 'Taxi Driver', 1976, directed by Martin Scorsese. In this scene Travis Bickle, played by Robert De Niro, repeatedly interrogates his own image in a mirror: "You talkin' to me?" The two images face one another, they begin in sync, then fall increasingly out of step as the film progresses. This device echoes Bickle's loss of self-control, auguring his later mental breakdown.

*"In its almost dizzying play of dualities, through a looking glass perfectly articulates the dialectical inversions, doublings, and repetitions that are the central concerns of Gordon's work."*<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jung C G. *Man and His Symbols*. London: Picador; 1978. p. 5 - 6

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 72

<sup>30</sup> Gordon D. *through a looking glass*, 1999. Two-channel video installation, with sound.

<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/show-full/piece/?search=through%20a%20looking%20glass&page=&f=Title&object=99.5304>

While at university, Gordon's tutor introduced him to the idea of Caledonian Antisyzygy. This is a term that is concerned with the notion of a character containing polarised elements that vie with one another for dominance. G. Gregory Smith, who saw this state as typical for the Scottish psyche and literature, coined the term in the book of 1919 'Scottish Literature: Character and Influence':

*"...the literature [of Scotland] is the literature of a small country... it becomes, under the stress of foreign influence, almost a zigzag of contradictions. The antithesis need not, however, disconcert us. Perhaps in the very combination of opposites... 'the Caledonian antisyzygy' - we have a reflection of the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn, in his political and ecclesiastical history, in his polemical restlessness, in his adaptability...the admission that two sides of the matter have been considered...in his literature the Scot presents two aspects which appear contradictory."* <sup>31</sup>

Once he became familiar with the work of G. Gregory Smith, Gordon began his own exploration of the Scottish psyche, and in particular that element of it that expresses an apparent desire or need to be at that precise point 'where extremes meet'. Robert Louis Stevenson was a perfect manifestation of this condition. As a young man, he would leave his privileged middle-class home in Edinburgh's New Town and make his way to the area on the other side of Princes Street, where he would associate with sex-workers, murderers and alcoholics. It was subsequent to this that the character Dr. Jekyll would reflect his creator. Furthermore, bubbling up beneath his cultured, middle-class veneer was the, brutal, savage and repressed alter ego: Mr. Hyde.

*"I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both; and from an early date... I had learned to dwell with pleasure, as a beloved daydream, on the thought of the separation of these elements. If each, I told myself, could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable..."* <sup>32</sup>

The Scottish psychologist R.D. Laing was an important figure in the revolutionary anti-psychiatry movement. He challenged the techniques practiced by the psychiatric profession of the 1960's, which, he thought, regarded mental illness as purely biological in origin, disregarding intellectual, social, and cultural stimuli. Existential thinkers such as Camus and Sartre influenced him to

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<sup>31</sup> Smith G. Gregory. *Scottish Literature: Character And Influence* Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Ltd; 1919. p. 8 - 9

<sup>32</sup> Stevenson. Op Cit. p. 48

view society as being to blame for schizophrenia and psychosis in individuals over-burdened by often contradictory social expectations, in fact, he barely considered such disorders as illnesses at all, but as the symptoms manifested by unfortunates who try to free themselves of these societally imposed shackles and find the way back to their natural state, and freedom.

In his video installation 'Divided Self I and II', 1996, Douglas Gordon's arms, against the background of white fabric suggestive of bedding, seem to wrestle with one another for supremacy, whether sexual or otherwise. One arm is darkly hairy; the other is clean-shaven.

Laing's book:<sup>33</sup>

*"...gave Gordon the title of his video installation. One of the main purposes of Laing's book was to try and show how schizophrenia (and schizoid tendencies) could and should be understood from within, through empathy and attentive listening, and not from an artificially and outwardly imposed theoretical position. What this human approach does is to allow us to see that people suffering from these conditions are not alien beings but people who, through various factors, have not been able to come to terms with the competing personalities and internal parts that make up the human mind."*<sup>34</sup>

### **The Hyperreal**

*"...the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."*<sup>35</sup>

The 'Simulacrum' surname was added later, after reading 'Simulacra and Simulation' by Jean Baudrillard. At the time that I created my alter ego, I searched the literature of art theory, semiology and philosophy. I selected the proposition of 'simulacrum' as a surname, thus giving a clue as to what I was trying to achieve with this character, and also to anchor it within the established contextual theory of art.

*"...all closed systems protect themselves at the same time from the referential - as well as from all metalanguage that the system*

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<sup>33</sup> Laing R D. *The Divided Self. An Existential Study In Sanity And Madness*. London: Penguin; 1986.

<sup>34</sup> Hartley K. *Superhumannatural*. Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland; 2006. p. 38

<sup>35</sup> Baudrillard J. *Simulations*. 1983.

<http://www.ee.sun.ac.za/~hgibson/docs/html/Simulacra-and-Simulation.html>

*forestalls in playing at its own metalanguage; that is to say in duplicating itself in its own critique of itself. In simulation, the metalinguistic illusion duplicates and completes the referential illusion (pathetic hallucination of the sign and pathetic hallucination of the real).<sup>36</sup>*

Baudrillard claims a greater authenticity for the original or *real*, less for the *hyperreal*, or simulated version. It is my view that humans, through language, create the world they inhabit. Simply having words for them creates notions; abstract concepts have no life without language. My normal Matthew Wickham self has been created by my parents and by my life experiences, and in a sense, these are all accidental stimuli or circumstances, but Boo Simulacrum, on the other hand, was created solely by me, with a conscious will to create him in the same way that a sculptor consciously and intentionally *creates* a sculpture, so Boo is my artwork, and an idealised version of myself: me as I would like to be, as I could be had I had complete control of my experiences, education and circumstances. Of course, I state this with the benefit of hindsight, having lived my life. Had I lived another life, Boo would be different, in fact he would most likely not exist at all.

Boo's story is my artist's myth: in it I seek to explain some of the motivations and purposes involved in adopting this character in my work, both during and not during performance. I have constantly asserted that Boo is real, or as real as, say, God or any other mythical character that is tacitly agreed upon to exist. He is, to a large degree, autobiographical, as well as being based on characters and events in books and films that had a strong influence on me as a child, shaping me at an early stage of my development, thus making the case for the character as a triumph of nurture over nature, and the greater relevance of the hyperreal over that of the real. Linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson make a similar assertion in their work 'Metaphors We Live By':

*"What legitimately motivates subjectivism is the awareness that meaning is always meaning to a person. What's meaningful to me is a matter of what has significance for me. And what is significant for me will not depend on my rational knowledge alone but on my past experiences, values, feelings, and intuitive insights...we see the experientialist myth as capable of satisfying the real and reasonable concerns that have motivated the myths of both subjectivism and objectivism but without either the objectivist obsession with*

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

*absolute truth or the subjectivist insistence that imagination is totally unrestricted.”<sup>37</sup>*

The idea that Boo is a doll-maker, making artificial life in the same way that he himself was made, was based on the character J.F. Sebastian in the 1982, Ridley Scott film 'Blade Runner':

*"I MAKE friends. They're toys. My friends are toys. I make them. It's a hobby. I'm a genetic designer".<sup>38</sup>*

Based on Phillip K. Dick's science fiction novel 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep', 1968, this film questions the morality of creating artificial human life, then employing a separate set of ethics and laws for these simulated beings. There is an obvious question mark over the ethicality of Victor Frankenstein's actions also, and to my mind, Dick's novel obliquely references Shelley's. These creations of artificial life are Simulacra, and according to Baudrillard, therefore, not deserving of the same consideration as more *authentic* beings.

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<sup>37</sup> Lakoff G. and Johnson M. *Metaphors We Live By*. London: The University of Chicago Press; 2003. p. 227 - 228

<sup>38</sup> Quotes from the 'Bladerunner' character J F Sebastian.  
<http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0002850/quotes>

## How?

*one day he had an idea about how he could learn to be a REAL ARTIST this was to make a doll that looked like the OLD ARTIST with a hat like his and a brain made from mashed up pictures of his artworks and honey all mixed together and bring the doll to life so that it could tell boo about ART and how to make it*

*so he also made some machines and special chairs and headsets and things to connect boo to the doll and put the spirit of the OLD ARTIST into the doll boo had made but because boo and the doll and the OLD ARTIST were all connected the spirit did not go into the doll for long before it came out again and WENT INTO BOO*

*boo now had the voice of the OLD ARTIST in his head all the time and very soon he was making PROPER ARTWORKS and doing performances and he even got asked to be in exhibitions and it was not long after this that boo met HIM*

*but sometimes people did not understand his artworks like when he took some things he had made to the village to show in an exhibition they were having there but they just laughed at him and would not let him be in it but this did not matter because HE liked boos work and boo started working with HIM and for a while it was all going really well*

During the 1960s Beuys developed his central ideas concerning the cultural, social, and political role of art as a means of healing society from the bottom up. Influenced by the social ideas of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy movement and bio-dynamics, he was convinced of the power and potential of human creativity and its ability to effect social change for the better, as manifested by his concepts of *Social Sculpture*, whereby society itself can be viewed as a huge and complex art work; and *Direct Democracy*, that exhorts all members of society to take direct control of the politics, legislation and organisation that affect them. Political activist and founder member of the German Green Movement, Beuys famously said: "Everyone is an artist."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> 'Everyone is an artist' quote analysed.  
<http://www.walkerart.org/archive/1/A843698FB2232A536167.htm>

## The Real

A very clear example of how truth can be created is the craft of the method actor. Constantin Sergeevich Stanislavsky, taught that there are no easy shortcuts to the convincing performance, no substitute to truthfulness. He claimed that if theatre was to be convincing and meaningful it had to go beyond the traditional external representation that acting had always been limited to. He developed an approach that focused on emotional and psychological elements of acting. The Stanislavsky System, or The Method, as it is now known, states that the actor's main responsibility is to be believed.

Once the actor has brought together all the obvious facts about the character to be played, and imagined what it is to live within the boundaries of that role, there then arises the far more demanding task: that of taking these insights and using them to more fully comprehend the human condition. Stanislavsky exhorted actors to:

*"Take nothing for granted. Think of your own experiences and use them truthfully."*<sup>40</sup>

To bring about a *believable truth*, Stanislavsky developed techniques such as emotional memory. For instance, in preparation for a stage role involving fear, an actor must remember an experience eliciting the same emotion, thus attempting to act the role in the same emotional space of the fear they previously experienced. Stanislavsky also asserted that an actor must take their own personality onto the stage when playing a character, breaking from more traditional modes of acting that held the actor's job as *becoming* the character, leaving his or her own emotions behind. Stanislavsky later developed the technique of the introduction of physical entries into such emotional states. He believed that the repetition of particular acts, gestures and exercises helped to blur the boundary between the actor and the role being performed.

The actor Robert De Niro is probably the most famous exponent of The Method, much lauded for his commitment to the roles he played. Famously, he increased his weight by sixty pounds and learned the sport of boxing for his depiction of Jake LaMotta in the 1980 film 'Raging Bull'. He paid a dentist five thousand dollars to have his teeth ground for 'Cape Fear' in 1991. He moved to Sicily

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<sup>40</sup> Method Acting and Stanislavsky.  
<http://method.vtheatre.net/stanislavsky.html>

for 'The Godfather', 1972. He worked as a cab driver for a number of months for 'Taxi Driver' in 1976. He paid for saxophone lessons in preparation for 'New York, New York', 1977. He also gained many pounds in weight and shaved his hairline in order to play Al Capone in the film 'The Untouchables', 1987.

De Niro's approach to method acting includes employing any process or technique available to him in order to elicit the best performance from his co-actors. For example, while making the 1982 film 'The King of Comedy', he directed anti-Semitic insults at his Jewish co-star Jerry Lewis in order to augment the anger demonstrated by Lewis' character in the film. According to 'People' magazine, this device was more than successful; Lewis recalled:

*"I forgot the cameras were there... I was going for Bobby's throat."*<sup>41</sup>

I employ various techniques that are informed by The Method in order to achieve realistic performances.

When I change into the costume I generally wear in my performance work as Boo Simulacrum, I *become* him, in a sense the spirit of my Amagat possesses me (the shaman believes that when he/she enters the trance necessary to heal, influence weather or gain information from the realms above or below this one, he or she becomes possessed by the spirit of the Amagat. The Amagat is the spirit of a deceased, former shaman, a tutelary spirit who, already in the spirit realm, is able to act as a guide and protector to the shaman while in this dangerous state. For Boo and I, the Amagat is Joseph Beuys). The donning of this costume allows me a sense of separation or dislocation from my normal identity, it allows me to say "Now I am Boo, no longer myself, these are *his* clothes, not my own", thus allowing me to achieve a more convincing performance.

*"Clothing is emblematic, and can be identified as a uniform. Its constituent parts may amount to mimicry – helping to create the disguise adopted by the object of the gaze."*<sup>42</sup>

But at the same time, paradoxically perhaps, much of what Boo represents, much of who he is, what he stands for and how he behaves has an autobiographical basis, making it easy for me to assume this persona because he is an aspect of myself. In a sense I

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<sup>41</sup>Jerry Lewis Interview.

<http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20084218,00.html>

<sup>42</sup> Howell A. *The Analysis of Performance Art*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers; 1999. p. 15

become *more* myself when I assume this persona, because this donning enables me to forget mores and social expectations about how we should and should not behave, and honestly comment on what I deem important.

I make performance work that comments on issues that concern me: generally the environment, sustainability or social exclusion. When the performance addresses one of these (to me) important issues, transmitting the correct level or quality of emotion as a suitable response is straightforward.

## Why?

*boo often wondered who or what he was and where he came from*

The persona I employ in my performance work arrived at a time in my life when I was experiencing both physical and psychological ill health. At this time I was beginning to change my practice as an artist from applied sculpture or design to more concept-based work and performance. I was researching contemporary art practice, and using Joseph Beuys as a case study. I was also researching shamanism and occult notions of the spirit and its survival after the extinction of the physical self.

Those who have undergone traumatic and life-changing experiences such as bereavement, serious illness, major surgery or the termination of an important relationship commonly feel a sense of what is described by psychologists as *dissociation*. Shamans refer to this phenomenon as *soul-loss*:

*"The conception of disease as a loss of the soul, either strayed away or abducted by a spirit or a ghost, is extremely widespread... When a soul carried off by spirits or the dead is to be sought, the shaman is believed to leave his body and enter the underworld or the regions inhabited by the abductor."<sup>43</sup>*

Those who experience such traumas as those previously mentioned may psychologically 'leave' so as to survive the incident. They continue in this disassociated state, in other words, they feel that their personality, spirit or what you will, is no longer complete; elements of the 'self' have fled the body.

Psychotherapy may fail to address cases such as these when the client has experienced childhood trauma as well as trauma in later life. In other words, not all their elements are *home*: the parts that fled in order to survive have not been regained. Carl Jung defined 'dissociation' as an interruption to the integration of an individual's normal conscious or psychological functioning, allowing the mind to protect itself from experiences that are too difficult for it to successfully process at all at once. Jung stated that this response could lead to a split between different elements of the personality.

I felt the need to separate this tortured, dark element of myself, externalise it, in order to protect myself and use the resultant character as a cipher, an aid in my work and a means of healing

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<sup>43</sup> Eliade M. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. London: Penguin Arkana; 1989. p. 327

myself. This dark element or 'shadow', the 'shadow aspect', in Jungian terms, is a facet of the unconscious mind where repressed weaknesses and instincts reside, and is one of the major archetypes, along with the animus/anima and the persona. Jung considered the shadow to be link with a more primitive, instinctual self, and a more creative one:

"... in spite of its function as a reservoir for human darkness—or perhaps because of this—the shadow is the seat of creativity... so that for some, it may be, the dark side of his being, his sinister shadow...represents the true spirit of life as against the arid scholar."<sup>44</sup>

So, in the case of myself and Boo; this suffering, this disunity of the self, led to precisely the creativity referred to by Jung, it was previously hidden within the person of the shadow. There is a strong duality here: that good can come from bad, peace from suffering, new life from the death of a part of the old and creation from aridity.

*"Certain physical sufferings find their exact counterparts in terms of a (symbolic) initiatory death – for example, the dismemberment of the candidate's (the sick man's) body, an ecstatic experience that can equally well be brought on by the sufferings of a "sickness-vocation" or by certain ritual ceremonies or, finally, in dreams."*<sup>45</sup>

The moment at which Boo "woke up" represents the beginning of a new life, the old body is dead, dismantled by the shaman master, who then reconstructs the parts to create a new being: a new shaman, an artist.

*"It was a major crisis; I questioned everything, literally everything, including my life. During this crisis I decided to seek out, with all my strength, the most profound element in life, art... The positive aspect was the start of a new life. The whole thing is a therapeutic process. I realised the role that an artist can play in indicating the traumas of a time and initiating a healing process. This relates to medicine, or what people call alchemy or shamanism..."*<sup>46</sup>

My own physical and spiritual breakdown closely mirrors the experience of Joseph Beuys outlined above; where, as in his case, I required art in order to heal myself, or even in order to survive. It was a form of self-prescribed therapy. This is reminiscent of the tradition in shamanic societies of enlisting the physically and mentally ill tribal member into the role of shaman; the nascent

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<sup>44</sup> C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London 1983) p. 26

<sup>45</sup> Eliade. *Op Cit.* p. 34

<sup>46</sup> De Domizio Durini L. *The Felt Hat Joseph Beuys A Life Told*. Milan: Edizioni Charta; 1997. p.24

shaman reaches a point of crisis where it is considered that his or her (societies based on shamanic belief wrote the book on gender equality) only hope is to throw in his/her lot with the spiritual leader of the tribe: a case of 'Healer heal thyself'. Beuys was obviously conscious of the provenance of the symbolic death of the old body (experienced by him in the form of his plane crash in Crimea) and the role of the artist shaman as a healer of self, and, by extension, others.

*"Many art historians believe that art has its roots in shamanism and that its original function was to illustrate the shamanic experience and be a focus for shamanic power."<sup>47</sup>*

Freud viewed a mentally healthy adulthood as the result of a series of compromises, a burying of obsessions and desires deeply within the unconscious where they are manifest only as dreams. He viewed all that is infant as uncanny: infants answer the compulsion to repeat experiences, they can only recognise their own image in a mirror from the age of 18 months, and they have a liking for doubles, while adults fear them. Freud asserts that these primitive (he likens infants to primitives or savages) desires and obsessions have to be overcome through 'repression': one of his theoretical defence mechanisms. But through this process, we can only *overcome*, never eliminate, and these deep-seated obsessions will out, often in the form of art, literature and other culture, much of it popular. Boo is an example of this breaking out of an earlier, deep-seated obsession, a regression to an earlier stage of the development of the psyche in order to isolate certain elements of the self, this became necessary to protect the personality as a whole.

*"Often these early performance works dealt with taboo, social isolation and the transformative/cathartic role of artist as the hero/martyr/fool."<sup>48</sup>*

As can be seen in his story, Boo shuns society; he is a shadowy figure on the edge of the community, looking in. In the ancient and primitive societies presided over by shamans, the villagers would seldom see this mysterious figure, he would appear only at times when he or she had official business in the community, be it teaching, healing, the blessing of lances and arrows prior to a hunt, dancing to influence the weather and so on. At all other times the shaman lived alone outside, but not far from the edge of the village.

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<sup>47</sup> Soul loss from a shamanic perspective.  
<http://www.shamanicartsstudio.com/Shamanism.htm>

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

There are various reasons for this: the shaman needed to keep a distance or separation from the ordinary, secular life of the village in order to maintain a mysterious role within its midst. There were elements of confidence trickery in the shamanic practice, many of these practices of performance and trickery requiring specialist equipment and abilities that had to be built, developed and practiced in secret.

*"Some push the roots of performance art much further back to the very beginnings of human culture. They argue that all art has its origin in performative symbolic actions such as rituals and rites of passage. Many performance artists, especially in the 1960's and 1970's consciously cultivated the idea of the artist as shaman."*<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Performance Art – Webinar Transcript.

<http://www.slideshare.net/mtarrigo/performance-art>

## Where?

*then one day HE said boo you are going to have your own exhibition in a BIG WHITE GALLERY in the city and boo was very excited but HE was getting very bossy with boo and saying that this exhibition was much more important than usual and that boo had to only make things that HE told him to make and threw a lot of things out that boo had made while working in the BIG WHITE GALLERY*

*it is all very confusing now because boo doesn't know where boo begins and HE ends so boo wishes he had stayed in his little house in the woods*

*boo gets very upset and angry at how people waste lots of things and throw useful things away not only because it is a waste but because people throw things away in beautiful places that boo likes to go and they do not rot away but stay there for ever and sometimes boos friends the animals and birds get caught up in the things that are thrown away or poisoned*

*boo thought he wanted to be a REAL ARTIST and make things for people to look at but he never really cared if the things were for sale because he wanted to make things that had a message about the beautiful places he had seen*

*but boo quickly realised when working with HIM in the BIG WHITE GALLERY that this was not boos world and that he did not belong there because people did not care about what boo was trying to say or about the beautiful places or the birds and animals but just wanted to buy things to put in their big houses or sell them for more money*

*so boo realised that he was an OUTSIDER*

Boo's 'BIG WHITE GALLERY' is the 'ideal' of the contemporary exhibition space: the white cube. A clean, neutral environment; perfect for artworks to inhabit without the distractions of superfluous ornamentation.

Brian O'Doherty encapsulated the modern ideal of the gallery space in his book 'Inside the White Cube'. A place where artworks take on a life of their own through the formality of the construct, it could be said that *anything* can become art in such a setting.

*"The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is "art." The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. This gives the*

*space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values. Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of esthetics. So powerful are the perceptual fields of force within this chamber that once outside it, art can lapse into secular status- and conversely.”<sup>50</sup>*

So what of the work of Boo Simulacrum? Is it correct that his work is presented in such a clinical environment?

'HE' chose to curate Boo in such a way that Boo's very existence became art: the residue of his mundane life, his booze, his fags, his tools, and his sleeping arrangements. The language of the white cube demands the reverence of the object, a gleaming clean space where the observer cannot think that there is anything other than art that they are viewing. So Boo becomes the artwork: his *own* art was rejected. Through this, a narrative of the very existence of Boo Simulacrum was created in all its grubby glory, a familiarity of object, texture and smell that is recognisable to the audience.

*"The smell is difficult to place as it conjures both wholly natural, earthy environment and also an unpleasant, fusty human odour. In this initial display of three, which comprise the full installation, there are clothes and bedclothes looking like damp personal effects of a lonely, long-gone, prospector. They have moved into a realm of abstraction, becoming sculptural. The bedding is plump and heavy, laid out on a pallet bed-plinth. The cigarettes overflow into a rosette of dreary time markers from a metal ashtray.*

*A small table and chair, formed by lashing together slim tree branches form another domestic vignette. Carefully positioned atop the table is Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Nearby is evidence of other sustenance: a large group of empty, unlabelled whisky bottles.”<sup>51</sup>*

The Post Rationalist philosopher Vittorio Guidano posited the notion of the passive neutral observer as a 'privileged witness'<sup>52</sup>. If we apply this notion to the viewing of artworks, it would imply that no dialogue is entered into between the artist, the works and the audience. However, Guidano adds that if we can see a network of

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<sup>50</sup> O'Doherty B. *Inside the White Cube*. London: University of California Press; 1999. p. 14

<sup>51</sup> Simpson L. Grays School of Art – MAstars 2010  
<http://www.axisweb.org/grCVFU.aspx?SELECTIONID=20789>

<sup>52</sup> Ruiz A. *Theoretical Basis of the Post Rationalist Approach*.  
<http://www.inteco.cl/post-rac/ifundam.htm>

exchange between the observer and that which is observed we arrive at a different sensorial engagement, that in which the observer recognises patterns familiar to him through which narratives can be formed. This when applied to art leads to an understanding of the intent of the artist in creating work to be viewed by an audience, thereby making the artwork speak for itself.

*"...the observation of the observer is a constitutive part of what is observed."*<sup>53</sup>

We can use this philosophical model to understand Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of 'relational aesthetics'.

*"Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise. The artistic form, for some, side-steps this inevitability, for it is publicised by a work. Our persuasion, conversely, is that form only assumes its texture (and only acquires a real existence) when it introduces human interactions. The form of an artwork issues from a negotiation with the intelligible, which is bequeathed to us. Through it, the artist embarks upon a dialogue. The artistic practice thus resides in the invention of relations between consciousness. Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum."*<sup>54</sup>

So from this we understand the dialogue created by gallery, artist, artwork and audience. What of the problems of the performance artist in presenting work within the white cube context after the fact? Or of the site-specific environmental or outsider artist? Can such work inhabit the white cube successfully?

Performance artist Alastair MacLennan:

*"It's the search for identity, value and meaning, making 'live' art in a materialist culture which devolves the idiom out of 'existence' since it can't be consumed as cultural 'real estate'. There's no single, generally accepted 'grammar' for evaluating the relative*

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Bourriaud N. *Relational Aesthetics*. 1998.  
<http://www.creativityandcognition.com/blogs/legart/wp-content/uploads/2006/07/Borriaud.pdf>

*worth of performance, though one exists for the other visual arts, and is in regular use internationally. Hardly any serious, coherent, written appraisal of performance is made, even in the art world. It's kept well to the edge of public awareness, having no place in its value-structure. Performance artists will either resolve this issue, or remain peripheral".<sup>55</sup>*

From this we can understand that MacLennan believes that performance art cannot be taken seriously within the money oriented white cube environment, it has no currency as artistic practice.

Unless the performance artist can be present throughout the duration of the exhibition, it is difficult to provide the viewer with an authentic experience of the artist's intent. This problem can be overcome through the use of video documentation, photographs or performance residue, i.e. objects or marks left in the place where the artist used them after the performance was finished. However, the placing of documentation after the fact somehow disrupts the intent of the initial performance, an intervention within the dynamic of the context that may not be successful or desirable. The documentation is not the art: that left the building with the artist.

Alastair MacLennan further examines this dilemma in the following transcript from his piece 'Aught Naught':

*"A. MacLennan. Question: how to have an exhibition of art that by it's very nature cannot be recreated and evidence of which exists only in fragmentary, documentary form? For example, how can performance be represented beyond its moment, how can one produce a major exhibition of work when that work is primarily time-based, site-specific and exists only in the moment of its execution? How can one work with what is primarily documentation of this work to make an exhibition without presenting and confusing the documentation as art in its own right, while at the same time, recognising the documentation's aesthetic and other qualities? How can performance documentation be appropriately used, manipulated and processed for exhibition formats?... How can these performances be appropriately represented in a gallery? ... How can a productive relationship be made between performance documentation and a new work performed in or out of a gallery, such that neither is inappropriately fetishised or commodified, and*

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<sup>55</sup> *Live Art Now Performance Magazine n.37 1985 - Performance Art Survey.*  
<http://vads.ahds.ac.uk/collections/macLennan/statement.htm>

*the exhibition respects the ethos, spirit and intention of the actual work? A. MacLennan.”<sup>56</sup>*

My own intent with the performance piece made within the white cube of my Masters show was to create an intriguing collection of marks, ones in adherence to the gestural language of drawing that required the interpretation of the audience. The device used for the mark making was left to be viewed, as was Boo’s ever-present whisky bottle. The viewer, in accordance with Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics, was then able to formulate a mental narrative. So, it could be that the residue of the performance becomes *performative*; it assumes a new artistic significance beyond the duration of the action itself.

What of the site-specificity of much land art or environmental art? How does it relate, or not, to context of the white cube? Land art sounds to be an art that celebrates the natural landscape, and, in a way, it does. But whilst highlighting the beauty of such environments, a fair amount of destruction to them was achieved.

*“The Land art movement of the 1960s and 70s has often been seen as the origin of today’s environmental art. Land artists famously left the white cube of the gallery to make dramatic interventions in the living landscape. ‘Instead of using a paintbrush to make his art Robert Morris would like to use a bulldozer.’<sup>57</sup> This statement by Robert Smithson points to the ‘earthmovers’ preoccupation with marking, removing, and rearranging natural materials on a grand scale, arguably treating nature as a giant canvas.”<sup>58</sup>*

Meanwhile, the more conceptual artists of the period were pouring their own energy, rather than fossil fuels powering bulldozers, into the making of ‘dematerialised’ art. This took the form of performance, actions and the presentation of objects that had no commodifiable value: a democratisation of the art world.

*“... dematerialisation, through the disavowal of the art object and shift towards process-based practices, performances, actions, as well as ephemeral works that were created not to last, was an invaluable inheritance for later sustainable art, as of course was the*

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<sup>56</sup> Alastair MacLennan, ‘Aught Naught’.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZfiREjv3Gs>

<sup>57</sup> Robert Smithson quoted in Kastner J, Wallis B. *Land and Environmental Art*. London: Phaidon; 1998.

<sup>58</sup> [http://greenmuseum.org/generic\\_content.php?ct\\_id=265#\\_ftn8](http://greenmuseum.org/generic_content.php?ct_id=265#_ftn8)

*desire of conceptual artists to provoke on the level of idea or concept.*<sup>59</sup>

The white cube could be viewed as a context with no context, indeed a place that by announcing itself as a gallery, becomes a home for art, a place where the banal or mundane, the beautiful or ugly are revered. Yet surely this sanitises the environmental message the performance or object hope to achieve? There is a sense that the gallery, by being a place purely for artworks, simultaneously commodifies them, in a way isolating both the work and a potential audience who are threatened or excluded by the austere nature of such a setting. Boo's wish was that everyone had access to his messages, in kinship with the 'OLD ARTIST' whose ideas he had adopted. The dilemma remains: make subtle interventions within an extant and appropriate context, that may go unnoticed, or use the non-context context to one's own advantage?

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

## In Conclusion

When I enact a work of performance in the character of Boo Simulacrum, the performance is an artwork, and by extension, so is Boo. He is not an artist: he is the *creation* of an artist and therefore an *artwork*, but no less *real* for that.

An element of my artist's myth is that Boo and I collaborate, he as the artist, and I as Curator, facilitator and as mediator, the last because he has no voice and no experience of the *real* world and the art world. This relationship was examined in my degree show. The narrative was that Boo had been living in the space allocated to me in the art school, while producing work for an exhibition there. During the process of setting up the show, I placed a number of objects in a corner of the space under a hand-written sign: WORK NOT SELECTED FOR EXHIBITION. PLEASE COLLECT ASAP. SIGNED, THE CURATOR.

This work was the sculpture of Boo Simulacrum, most of which I created over six years ago, representing a part of my first piece of installation work: a series of strange machines designed to contact the spirit of Joseph Beuys, and tune in to creative influences from the ether, or from outside. These sculptures have the appearance of, and in fact are, work made by an Outsider artist, and therefore, arguably, they are *not* art.

The suggestion being that what was of interest to the curator was how Boo lived, behaved or performed, *not* what he made, because, in this context, *Boo* was the artwork, or *Boo's life*, *not* the things he made. The Curator chose to exhibit the residue of the artist's time spent in the space: his bed, empty whisky bottles, cigarette butts, and the tools and other evidence of his making, rather than any objects or sculptures themselves.

" 'Everyone an artist' was Beuys's most famous saying. Its vagueness (if we are all artists, what is art?) is exactly the kind of thing that riled his critics..."<sup>60</sup>

Although I like the sentiment behind Beuys' statement, I take issue with its accuracy, or rather with its accuracy on the face of things: everyone is *not* an artist, only artists are artists, although, perhaps everyone could be said to be *creative*. This was what Beuys meant: everyone should apply creativity, like that employed by artists, to their life and work. What Beuys called 'social sculpture' included this expanded view of art or creativity. This is why he never relaxed from his public persona; Caroline Tisdall says that:

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<sup>60</sup><http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/1999/jul/19/artsfeatures2>  
Caroline Tisdall Interview Monday 19 July 1999.

*"There wasn't anything else. That persona was Beuys - which is quite an interesting conundrum. I think that's because he was trying to say, 'everyone an artist', life itself is creative."*<sup>61</sup>

Likewise, Gilbert and George:

*"... personified the idea of art; they themselves became art, by declaring themselves 'living sculpture'... For Gilbert and George there was thus no separation whatsoever between their activities as sculptors and their activities in real life."*<sup>62</sup>

This performance artist and sculptor duo would have us believe that their work and their art are inseparable; like Beuys, they claim to *live* their art. I am not convinced: do they always dress in their signature suits, sitting in private at home wordlessly sticking their tongues out at one another, or posing to 'Underneath the Arches' with painted faces? I think not, though I have to admit, through very careful handling they have engineered it so that there is no evidence to the contrary. For me, this level of realism is not necessary. Boo is a metaphor, a demonstration of how a personality can be divided, he can be said to be as real as I am, in the sense supported by Laing, Jung Stevenson *et al.*

Friedrich Nietzsche hypothesises in 'A Will to Power':

*"The sphere of a subject (is) constantly growing or decreasing... in cases where it cannot organise the appropriate mass, it breaks into two parts... The assumption of a single subject is perhaps unnecessary: perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general? A kind of 'aristocracy of cells' in which dominion resides? To be sure, an aristocracy of equals, used to ruling jointly and understanding how to command? My hypothesis: The subject as multiplicity."*<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Goldberg R. *Performance Art*. Thames and Hudson; 1988 p 167 -168

<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche F. *The Will to Power*. Trans. Kaufmann W. New York: Vintage; 1968. p. 270

The human mind and its conflicting interests are complex beyond our comprehension. The supposition of reality becomes ever more notional. We may obtain an understanding that we cannot resolve these issues, but hope that only by accepting the division of self as an irreconcilable truth of our existential strife and pain can some resolution be reached. Creativity becomes manifest through conflict. Boo Simulacrum's birth externalised my own internal battles, yet he is indivisible from Matthew Wickham: a fusion of selves, of the multiplicity of human emotion and thought, and ultimately an agent of healing.

Alastair MacLennan:

*"... The resolution of inner and outer conflict. The fusion of opposites. The healing of wounds within and outwith the self. Metaphors of hurt and healing. Manifesting creativity is ultimately uncontainable by any one form. The source of creativity residing in each individual."*<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> In an interview with Linda Montano Alastair MacLennan states his major concerns as an artist. Montano L M. *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*. London: University of California Press; 2000. p. 386

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